



Literary and Cultural Interpretation -

3 Papers

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To my fellow students at Wilson College
(Spring – 2010)

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Literary and Cultural Interpretation – 3 Papers
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Literary and Cultural Interpretation
w/Prof. Larry Shillock

[Wilson College](#)

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A Bakhtinian Understanding of Robert Louis Stevenson's: *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

Thesis statement: Russian literary theorist [Michael Bakhtin](#) theorizes that all speech acts, which he calls “utterances”, anticipate a response on the part of an active listener.

Three main points to follow: 1) Stevenson's [novella](#), as a whole, is a Bakhtinian utterance of the complex, secondary speech genre; 2) Stevenson's novella, as a whole, elicits a powerful Bakhtinian response from an active Bakhtinian listener; 3) Stevenson's use of Dr. Lanyon's letter, which is of the simple, primary speech genre, ends the narrator's Bakhtinian utterance and becomes caught-up into “actual reality” by being incorporated into the utterance that is the novella—the epitome, according to Bakhtin, of the living, complex, sociologically oriented, secondary speech genre that is: the novel (or, in Stevenson's case: the novella). Contrary to other linguists, who think of language as a system of signs, Bakhtin emphasizes the sociological nature of language. Theorizing that the spoken word is primary, Bakhtin denies neutrality to language and exposes all “speech acts” as being heavy-laden with sociological presuppositions, because all speakers are also active listeners who have been influenced by—and who are responding to—innumerable, prior, sociological utterances. Bakhtin theorizes that these sociologically influenced, non-neutral speech acts always anticipate a response from an active listener. As for Bakhtin's concept of the utterance, Bakhtin tells us “The utterance is not a conventional unit [i.e., an abstract, sign-system, unit of speech], but a real unit, clearly delimited by the change of speaking subjects . . .”[1] Bakhtin also tells us that, “Each separate utterance is individual . . . but each sphere [i.e., genre] in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types of these utterances. These we may call *speech genres*.”[2] According to Bakhtin, there are two types of speech genres: the primary (i.e., the simple) and the secondary (i.e., the complex). For example, the primary speech genre consists of the simple utterances (e.g., words, phrases, and expressions) of everyday life; whereas the secondary speech genre consists of primary utterances which are shaped, according to the spheres in which they are to be used, into the more complex utterances (e.g., scientific treaties, commentaries, novels), which are necessary for complex, socially-oriented communications.[3] Bakhtin thinks of the novel as a unique genre, because of its living, dynamic, and sociologically oriented nature: “Studying other genres is analogous to studying dead languages, studying the novel, on the other hand, is like studying languages that are not only alive, but still young.”[4] Concerning primary and secondary speech genres, Bakhtin tells us “These primary genres are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones . . . For example, rejoinders of everyday dialogue or letters found in a novel retain their form and their everyday significance only on the plane of the novel's content. They enter into actual reality only via the novel as a whole, that is, as a literary-artistic event and not as everyday life.” Bakhtin recognizes that the conventional approach to linguistics—with its emphases upon the abstract individual speaker and “the [abstract] function of thought [as] emerging *independently of communication*”[5] —is lacking as a proper understanding of

language. Instead, Bakhtin thinks of language as being—fundamentally—a sociological (i.e., communicative) phenomenon. In fact, Bakhtin stresses the importance of approaching language as a sociological phenomenon to such an extent that he refers to the abstract, conventional (speaker-centered) linguistic approach as a “science fiction”[6]. Bakhtin’s understanding of language, as a sociological and communicative endeavor, leads him to conclude that the speaker’s utterance (his “speech act”) will always elicit a response from an active listener: “When the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it.” This concept, of the speaker’s utterance eliciting an active response on the part of the listener, coupled with Bakhtin’s concept of the novel as a living, dynamic, and sociologically oriented utterance, or speech act, which consists of both primary and secondary speech genres that are brought together into a new and living whole, is a good critical theory to use in order to understand Stevenson’s novella: *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Any reader of Stevenson’s novella (or complex utterance) will undoubtedly experience within themselves—not simply a response, but a very powerful response indeed. Stevenson’s novella is a living, dynamic, and sociologically oriented utterance from beginning to end, which calls forth from the reader a powerful, emotional—even fearful—response. The reader senses that which the characters in the novella also sense: that there is something unmistakably evil about Mr. Hyde; although Mr. Hyde himself—in appearance only—is not so obviously evil (see p. 34). Although odd looking (e.g., troglodytic) Mr. Hyde appears to be an otherwise normal person; much as we think ourselves to be. The evil, which is perceived to exist within Mr. Hyde, is just that: evil within and not necessarily evil without. There is something one must experience—sense—by looking him in the face and looking him in the eye in order to perceive the evil which lies within this odd looking, but otherwise seemingly ordinary, man (see p. 40). Mr. Hyde’s actions, however, are most obviously evil; because when Mr. Hyde acts his actions resemble those of a cruel, vicious, ape-like, less evolved, primitive man (see p. 47). This strikes the reader of Stevenson’s novella very close to home, because she knows, thanks to Charles Darwin, that she herself is the progeny of less evolved, ape-like, primitive ancestors. Perhaps there is something of a “Mr. Hyde” dwelling—lying dormant—within her? The response of the reader is to doubt—immediately—their own civilized humanity which—until reading Stevenson’s novella—had seemed quite well assured; something which the reader had not really given much thought to. In fact, the reader has most likely presupposed themselves to be in possession of his civilized humanity until he found his presupposed notions about himself overtly challenged by Stevenson’s powerful utterance. Stevenson’s novella—taken as a whole—elicits a powerful response of both uncertainty and fear within the reader, who cannot come away from the novella the person they were before having read it. The reader’s thoughts about herself are altered and an active response elicited by the powerful, complex, living utterance that is: *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. [7] Throughout most (i.e., pp. 1-74) of this novella (utterance), Stevenson uses the voice of a narrator in order to communicate his story to the reader. This changes—abruptly—when the speech suddenly becomes that of Dr. Lanyon, coming to the reader in the form of a letter, which is an utterance of the primary speech genre that has been placed within—and brought into “actual reality”—the utterance of the secondary speech genre that is the novella itself. The narrator’s speech having ceased here now signifies the end of this utterance, and Dr. Lanyon’s letter now become the start of yet another utterance. The section titled *Dr. Lanyon’s Narrative* (p. 74) comes to us (the readers) in the form of an utterance of the primary speech genre: a

letter, which is written by Dr. Lanyon, and contains the most frightening revelation of the entire novella. And this utterance—this letter—is now caught-up into the greater utterance of the secondary, living speech genre that is the novella. Dr. Lanyon’s letter, placed here within the novella, finds its Bakhtinian “actual reality” in becoming the very climax toward which Stevenson has been leading the reader all throughout this frightful story: that Dr. Jekyll is, in fact, Mr. Hyde. Stevenson’s novella is a perfect example of what Bakhtin tells us is really going on with language: Stevenson wrote his novella (in itself a complex utterance) in order to elicit a strong and powerful response from the active reader/listener. Stevenson’s words are oriented, sociologically, toward future words—those of the reader/listener—as well toward creating, or causing, within the active reader/listener an inward—although not necessarily immediate—response. Stevenson uses simple utterances of the primary speech genre (e.g., words, phrases, everyday expressions) in order to form a much more complex utterance, of the secondary speech genre (e.g., the novella) by which he elicits a powerful and active response from the active reader/listener: a real fear that there exists a “Mr. Hyde” within each and every one of us—a cruel, vicious, less evolved, ape-like, primitive creature that longs to escape from beneath our civilized facades. I believe Bakhtin gives us a very accurate understanding of what’s really going on with language: words are primarily spoken and sociologically oriented. Words always carry along with them the sociological influences of previously spoken words or “speech acts” which have always elicited and anticipated active responses. There is no neutrality in language, because all language is heavy-laden with innumerable, prior, sociological influences which have given rise to active responses on the parts of the listeners who, influenced by these words, themselves become the speakers of yet more words and more utterances; of both the primary and the secondary speech genres. Language is not simply an abstract, speaker centered, system of signs; it’s a living, dynamic, sociological phenomenon in which speakers anticipate active responses to their utterances and active listeners become active speakers.

One Woman's Transformation from Other to Self - A de Beauvoirian Gender Interpretation of Kate Chopin's: The Awakening

Thesis statement: By using [Simone de Beauvoir](#)'s understanding of women as Other opposed to Self in [The Second Sex](#), I will demonstrate how the character of Edna Pontellier, in [The Awakening](#), transitions from Other to Self. Simone de Beauvoir tells us that, historically speaking, men have long set themselves up as the One, the Absolute, the Subject, and the Self; therefore relegating women to the place of Other: "She [woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other"(de Beauvoir) Simone de Beauvoir tells us men have been defining women negatively for thousands of years: "The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities,' said Aristotle; 'we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.' And St Thomas for his part pronounced woman to be an 'imperfect man', an 'incidental' being. This is symbolised in Genesis where Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called 'a supernumerary bone' of Adam . . . Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being"(de Beauvoir). Early in *The Awakening* (p. 33), Edna Pontellier begins to realize that she is not, in fact, an Other—that is, a being defined negatively—but that she is, rather, a Self: "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (p. 33). The character of Edna is caught-up within the patriarchal Self/Other cultural milieu of her time but she does not feel as though she properly belongs to it: "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman . . . women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (p. 19). Simone de Beauvoir describes the patriarchal Self/Other milieu, in which Edna is Other simply because she is a woman: "When man makes of woman the Other, he may, then, expect to manifest deep-seated tendencies towards complicity. Thus, woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the Other"(de Beauvoir). In *The Awakening*, Edna is not at all content with her role as Other but she finds it difficult to break free of this role, which is constantly imposed upon her by the dominant patriarchal culture of which she is a part. The difficulty Edna has in learning how to break free of these patriarchal, cultural restraints is described metaphorically by the author: "Edna had attempted all summer to learn to swim" (p. 70). Edna's "learning how to swim" is the author's metaphorical description of Edna's learning how to be free or liberated—in the feminist sense—of patriarchal dominance. The first time Edna senses freedom, and the first time she realizes herself as Self rather than Other, is when she swims out to sea; and the experience terrifies her: "As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself. Once she turned and looked toward the shore,

toward the people she had left there. She had not gone any great distance—that is, what would have been a great distance for an experienced swimmer. But to her unaccustomed vision the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome. A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses. But by an effort she rallied her staggering faculties and managed to regain the land” (pp. 70-71). As she swims out into the sea, Edna seems to be “reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself”, and when she turned and “looked toward the shore” she was aware of “the people she had left there.” Edna’s awareness of the people she’s left behind, by swimming out to sea, represents (metaphorically) her hesitancy to cut the ties to the oppressive, patriarchal Self/Other milieu of which she is a part, which de Beauvoir speaks of, and Edna’s perception of “the stretch of water” as “a barrier, which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome,” represents her present inability to lay hold of the freedom and independence (i.e., the realization of herself as Self rather than Other) that her swimming out to sea or “reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself” represents. In this episode, the exploit of Edna’s swimming out to sea functions (metaphorically) as a mode of existential, feminist transcendence. As de Beauvoir points out, such “exploits or projects . . . serve as a mode of transcendence,”(de Beauvoir) yet when Edna catches a glimpse of her potential freedom—a brief moment of existential, feminist transcendence—she shrinks away from it in (deathly) terror, and it is only by great effort that she manage to swim back to shore. Edna resists, here, that which (alone) can set her free: the liberating ability to transcend the artificial boundaries that patriarchy has imposed upon her which limit her existence to that of Other. Edna tastes feminist liberation, but this taste of freedom frightens her and she swims back to shore. She fears both her separation from the world she is accustomed to and the world of feminine liberation, and she senses that in order to gain the freedom she desires and the freedom she has glimpsed in this one, terrifying moment of liberation, she must swim deep into the unknown. It is not until the end of *The Awakening* that Edna finally embraces, what I believe to be, her one, true Lover; whose desire for her is simply that which Edna desires for herself: to become a Self rather than an Other. A hopeless romantic—with an artistic, mercurial temperament and given to fantasies—Edna makes the romantic, realistic, and courageous decision to embrace the only, true Lover who is able to speak to her feminine soul; the only, true Lover whose sensuous, feminine touch enfolds her body in its soft, close embrace; the only, true Lover who can help Edna to embrace her feminist liberation: the sea. The author of *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin, personifies the sea as a feminine Lover in precisely this way: “The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (p. 34). Standing naked by the sea, Edna’s transcendental, feminist transformation—from unenlightened Other to enlightened Self—begins: “How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (p. 301). Here, on the beach, Edna realizes her new-born Self. This time, in swimming out to sea, Edna will realize (i.e. make real) that which de Beauvoir speaks of: “There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future”(de Beauvoir). Edna knows she will only find herself as Self by losing herself as Other within the deep, sensuous, open, and limitless embrace of her feminine Lover, the sea: “The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch

of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. She went on and on” This time Edna will not retreat from her new-found existential, feminist transcendence, because “[e]very time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence . . . the brutish life of subjection to given conditions – and of liberty into constraint and contingency”(de Beauvoir). Edna, now, has lost all desire for “life” as an Other and she embraces completely—although not without nostalgic longings—her new-found existence as a Self: “She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child . . . She thought of Léonce and the children . . . They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul . . . The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies . . . ‘Good-by—because, I love you’ . . . but it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone.” This time, Edna is not afraid, and she swims deep into her Lover’s eternal embrace. When she looks into the distance, the old (deathly) terror “flames up” for an instant, but then sinks again. Edna is no longer afraid; she embraces her Lover and in doing so she embraces her Self. She hears her father’s voice and her sister Margaret’s . . . the barking of an old dog chained to the sycamore tree . . . the spurs of the cavalry officer as he walks across the porch and she becomes one with her Lover, the sea, who—alone—helps Edna to realize her true being: “There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air” and Edna becomes one with the world—earth, sky and sea. Here, in her Lover’s soft and sensuous embrace—and only here—does Edna become one with herself as Self; she is no longer Other.

Semiotics and Representation in Oscar Wilde's: The Picture of Dorian Grey

Thesis statement: Using the theories of [semiotics](#) and [representation](#), I will demonstrate Oscar Wilde's use of signs and representations (in his novel [The Picture of Dorian Grey](#)) to create and give meaning to certain fictional objects and characters; especially the portrait of Dorian Grey and the actress Sibyl Vane. Beneath the surface level of the story, these objects and characters act as powerful signs and representations through which Wilde intended to communicate much deeper meaning than might at first appear. By interpreting these signs and representations through the theoretical lens of semiotics and representation we will be able to understand some of these deeper meanings.

By using the theories of semiotics and representation we will be able to delve into the realms of signs and representations that are found within this novel by asking questions of the text, such as "What are some of the signs and sign makers that appear in the novel?" "What do these signs represent?" "What purposes do these signs and representations have?" "What were the sign maker's intentions?" The theories of semiotics and representation, which are theories of signs wherein one thing (the sign) stands for (represents) something else (the signified), are useful tools of analysis for the literary critic because literature is created with language and language itself is a system of signs. As philosopher "Claude Levy-Strauss noted . . . 'language is the semiotic system par excellence; it cannot but signify, and exists through signification'" (Chandler, p. 9).

Authors create signs and representations by using language. For example, an author will create fictional objects and characters that signify, on the surface, the fictional objects and characters themselves but the author can also use these same fictional objects and characters to represent something more. Although a lesser author will use signs simply to create fictional objects and characters, a good author makes use of signs, such as fictional characters and objects, in order to communicate complex deeper meanings by creating signs that signify far more than the fictional characters and objects themselves.

As a theory, "semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign" and "involves the study . . . of anything which stands for something else" (Eco) and a "crucial consideration that enters into any analysis of representation is the relationship between the representational material and that which it represents" (Mitchell, p. 14).

Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, is the story of a complex sign—a picture (or portrait) of Dorian Grey—that is embedded within a complex system of signs (i.e., language) which is the text of the novel itself. The novel's characters and objects, such as Sibyl Vane and the portrait of Dorian Grey, signify and represent to us far more than what might at first appear to the casual, uncritical reader. One question for the critical reader being: "What

more do these fictional characters and objects signify and represent than what they at first appear to signify and represent?" In *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, the portrait of Dorian is not simply a portrait, nor is Sibyl Vane simply a woman Dorian falls in love with. Oscar Wilde is using these signs and representations to signify much more than this. "One crucial consideration that enters into any analysis of representation is the relationship between the representational material and that which it represents" (Mitchell, 14). The portrait of Dorian can be understood as the representational material that represents Dorian. The portrait of Dorian is an iconic image, a sign that resembles Dorian and points to Dorian who, although absent, might, through his image, be made present to all who see his image in the portrait. The painted representational image of Dorian in the portrait stands for and represents Dorian to others via his likeness; the actual image of Dorian having been reimaged on its canvass.

A "representation is always of something or someone, by something or someone, to someone" (Mitchell, 12). In the novel, the character of Basil creates a portrait of Dorian and in so doing Basil has created a life-like artistic representation of Dorian that allows anyone who sees this representation of Dorian to see Dorian without actually seeing him. Basil, the artist, has created a powerful representation which he intends as a sign that signifies and represents Dorian to those who will see it. Basil can be thought of as the maker and intender of Dorian's representation because the "intender" or "maker" of the representation [is] the one who says "let this dab of paint stand for this . . . to someone" (Mitchell, 12). Basil—in creating his life-like representation (or iconic image) of Dorian—has also revealed, to those who observe the painting, much—perhaps too much—about himself: "As the painter looked at the gracious and comely form he had so skillfully mirrored in his art, a smile of pleasure passed across his face, and seemed about to linger there. But he suddenly started up, and closing his eyes, placed his fingers upon the lids, as though he sought to imprison within his brain some curious dream from which he feared he might awake" (Wilde, p. 18).

The sign maker, especially the artist, risks revealing his own thoughts, hopes and dreams in their making of signs. Basil, the artist, is actually quite taken with the young Dorian, who has sat for his portrait. The fact that a "smile of pleasure passed across his [Basil's] face, and seemed about to linger there" reveals Basil's infatuation with Dorian, as does the "curious dream from which he feared he might awake" (ibid). It would appear that even the sign maker, the intender of the sign, can be influenced by their own representational signs and intentions. Basil's representation of Dorian causes him to linger upon the image he has created and the representational image arouses within him certain feelings, emotions, fantasies, and guilt. Images are indeed very powerful signs; even to those who have created them.

When Lord Henry says, "It is your best work, Basil, the best thing you have ever done . . . You must certainly send it next year to the Grosvenor" Basil responds by saying "I don't think I shall send it anywhere . . . No, I won't send it anywhere" (ibid). When pressed by Lord Henry as to why Basil doesn't want to show the portrait, Basil tells him, "I know you will laugh at me", he replied, 'but I really can't exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it'" (Wilde, p. 19). Basil is afraid that his representational image of Dorian will become a powerful sign to others that will indicate and reveal his hidden love for Dorian. Basil understands the meaning which the artist—the sign maker—is able to import to his representational image. As Basil explains, "every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is

rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul" (Wilde, p. 21).

Basil has poured his heart and soul (and his love for Dorian) into the portrait, and when Dorian sees it he is struck by the youthful beauty of his own image and he wishes that the representation of him would age rather than himself. Dorian, here, wants to reverse the order of sign making and representation: rather than the sign representing him, as it should be, he wishes that he could represent the sign and retain the sign's youthful image. Dorian wants to transfer his own mortality to the image and transfer the portrait's forever youthful image to himself:

"How sad it is!" murmured Dorian Gray with his eyes still fixed upon his own portrait. 'How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June . . . If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that--for that--I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!" (Wilde, p. 34)

Both Lord Henry and Basil are aware of the confusion that can take place between the sign and what the sign signifies: "You really must not say things like that before Dorian, Harry," said Basil. 'Before which Dorian?' Lord Henry replies, 'The one who is pouring out tea for us, or the one in the picture?' 'Before either,' said Basil" (Wilde, p. 36) It is possible for a sign and a representation to take on a greater meaning than the person or object which the sign is supposed to signify and which the representation is supposed to represent. For example, think of the difference between the advertised image of a product or of a famous celebrity as opposed to the actual product or celebrity. As interpreters who are heavily influenced by marketing imagery, people can often mistake the marketed image (the sign) for the real thing (the signified). "The painter bit his lip and walked over, cup in hand, to the picture. 'I shall stay with the real Dorian,' he said, sadly. 'Is it the real Dorian?' cried the original of the portrait, strolling across to him. 'Am I really like that?' 'Yes; you are just like that.' 'How wonderful, Basil!' 'At least you are like it in appearance. But it will never alter'" (Wilde, pp. 36-37). The image is not Dorian; it resembles and represents Dorian. The iconic image of Dorian—unlike Dorian himself—is frozen in time; it captures Dorian in the prime of his youthful beauty and vigor. But unlike the image, the real Dorian is not immortal. He will slowly age and decline in strength, whereas the iconic image of Dorian lives on; forever young. Basil's representational image of Dorian has made Dorian "the original of the portrait". The portrait is no longer simply a portrait of Dorian, Dorian himself has now become, since the creation of the portrait, of the portrait. The representational image has become something greater than the real thing and Dorian himself has become the image of an image. Dorian feels that Basil's life-like representation of him mocks his mortal existence, because the image will remain forever young. Dorian, like Basil, doesn't wish for anyone to see it, and he desires to take sole possession of the portrait: "If you let anyone have it but me, Basil, I shall never forgive you!" cried Dorian Gray. 'You know the picture is yours, Dorian,' Basil replied, 'I gave it to you before it existed'" (Wilde, p. 36).

A month goes by and we find that Dorian has fallen in love with a young actress named Sibyl Vane, whom he wishes to marry: "She was the loveliest thing I had ever seen in my life" said Dorian to Lord Henry, 'I tell you, Harry, I could hardly see this girl for the mist of tears that came across me. And her voice--I never heard such a voice . . . You know how a voice can

stir one. Your voice and the voice of Sibyl Vane are two things that I shall never forget. When I close my eyes, I hear them, and each of them says something different. I don't know which to follow. Why should I not love her? Harry, I do love her. She is everything to me in life” (Wilde, p. 51). Dorian, in falling in love with Sibyl Vane, the young actress, has in fact mistaken the image—the representation—for the real thing. He has not fallen in love with Sibyl Vane the woman but with Sibyl Vane-as-image; the Sibyl Vane who acts the parts of—images and represents—characters upon the stage: “Ordinary women [Sibyl the woman] never appeal to one's imagination . . . There is no mystery in any of them . . . They are quite obvious. But an actress! How different an actress is! Harry! Why didn't you tell me that the only thing worth loving is an actress? [Sibyl-as-image]” (ibid). An ordinary woman like Sibyl Vane doesn't appeal to Dorian's imagination, but Sibyl Vane-as-image does. Signs and representations appeal to our minds and our imaginations. Signs are created in order to present that which represent or signify something or someone to someone, and in order to understand what these signs represent we must use our ability to reimage or imagine what these signs and representations are intended, by their makers, to indicate and represent to us. Signs and representations call to mind the persons or objects they are created to signify and represent. And in mistaking the signifier for the signified, the representation for the represented, Dorian hasn't fall in love with Sibyl Vane the woman, he's fallen in love with Sibyl Vane-as-image. Sibyl, as an actress, becomes a living sign and representation (the signifier) of the fictional characters she portrays (the signified): “To-night she is Imogen,’ [Dorian] answered, ‘and to-morrow night she will be Juliet.’ ‘When is she Sibyl Vane?’ [Lord Henry inquired] ‘Never’ [Dorian replied]” (Wilde, p. 53).

Sibyl, not realizing that Dorian had mistaken her true self for her actress self, falls in love with Dorian; although she does question why he loves her: “Why does he love me so much? I know why I love him. I love him because he is like what love himself should be. But what does he see in me? I am not worthy of him. And yet—why, I cannot tell—though I feel so much beneath him, I don't feel humble. I feel proud, terribly proud” (Wilde, p. 58). Having fallen in love with Dorian, she now loses her ability to throw herself completely into acting, as someone who signifies and represents the characters she intends to portray on the stage. Now, in a play that Dorian and his friends attend, Sibyl's performance as an actress is horrid and hopelessly unbelievable. She is unable to represent or signify, as she is supposed to, the character of Juliet in the play. Instead she represents no one, and she reveals now, in her performance, her true self—Sibyl Vane the woman—a hopelessly distracted young woman who has fallen in love with Dorian Grey: “Dorian Gray grew pale as he watched her. He was puzzled and anxious. Neither of his friends dared to say anything to him. She seemed to them to be absolutely incompetent. They were horribly disappointed” (Wilde, p. 72). Dorian—who once told Lord Henry, “I love Sibyl Vane. I want to place her on a pedestal of gold and to see the world worship the woman who is mine” (Wilde, p. 68)—now, after witnessing Sibyl's terrible performance, tells Sibyl, “You used to stir my imagination. Now you don't even stir my curiosity. You simply produce no effect. I loved you because you were marvelous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art. You have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid. My God! How mad I was to love you! What a fool I have been! You are nothing to me now. I will never see you again. I will never think of you. I will never mention your name” (Wilde, p. 75).

It is Sibyl Vane-as-image Dorian loves—the Sibyl Vane who plays the roles of the characters she represents and signifies in plays—not Sibyl Vane the young woman who, in acting, becomes an artist who creates and represents the characters of the play to her audience. The woman that Dorian once wanted to place upon “a pedestal of gold” for the entire world to worship is not Sibyl Vane the woman who, because she loves (i.e., throws herself completely into) acting her parts on the stage, is a wonderful actress. The woman Dorian has fallen in love with is Sibyl Vane the signifier; the representation of a character, which he can place upon a pedestal, just as he can place the representation of himself, in Basil’s portrait, upon the artist’s easel. It is Sibyl the iconic image—as she is acting her parts—that Dorian falls in love with. Dorian only loves Sibyl Vane the woman twice removed; because, when acting her parts, she becomes the symbol of a symbol. This is the truth of Dorian’s love for Sibyl Vane, which he alluded to by saying that he wanted to put Sibyl upon “a pedestal of gold”. We do not literally place people upon pedestals; we only place the artistic representations of people upon pedestals (or easels). Dorian, in his adoration of Sibyl-as-image, desired to place a Sibylline icon upon a pedestal of gold, not Sibyl the woman.

When Dorian returned home, after Sibyl’s dreadful and embarrassing performance, “his eye fell upon the portrait Basil Hallward had painted of him. He started back as if in surprise. . . In the dim arrested light that struggled through the cream-coloured silk blinds, the face appeared to him to be a little changed. The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth” (Wilde, p. 77). He recalled his earlier wish, that the portrait would grow old rather than he himself—“that his own beauty might be untarnished, and the face on the canvas bear the burden of his passions and his sins (Wide, p. 78)” —and Dorian now realizes that, somehow, his wish has been fulfilled; because the portrait, with its “touch of cruelty” now evident in the mouth, appears to display the cruelty which he himself had displayed, earlier that evening, toward Sibyl: “Cruelty! Had he been cruel? It was the girl’s fault, not his. He had dreamed of her as a great artist, had given his love to her because he had thought her great. Then she had disappointed him. She had been shallow and unworthy. And, yet, a feeling of infinite regret came over him, as he thought of her lying at his feet sobbing like a little child” and a “sense of infinite pity, not for himself, but for the painted image of himself (now marred by cruelty), came over him” (ibid). Rather than see Basil’s representation of him marred by his cruelty, Dorian determines to “go back to Sibyl Vane, make her amends, marry her, try to love her again. He had been selfish and cruel to her. The fascination that she had exercised over him would return. They would be happy together. His life with her would be beautiful and pure” (Wilde, p. 79). Oscar Wilde, here, uses the portrait of Dorian Grey as a sign that signifies—visibly—that which only Dorian and Sibyl have seen: Dorian’s cruelty to Sibyl Vane. The portrait also signifies to Dorian his own mortality, which the painting from now on—rather than Dorian himself—will bear the marks of.

The following day, Dorian recognizes that Basil’s portrait has become for him the conscience that he otherwise lacks, and the (now marred) portrait inspires him to express remorse for his cruelty toward Sibyl: “It had made him conscious how unjust, how cruel, he had been to Sibyl Vane. It was not too late to make reparation for that. She could still be his wife. His unreal and selfish love would yield to some higher influence, would be transformed into some nobler passion, and the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him would be a guide to him through life, would be to him what holiness is to some, and conscience to others, and the fear of God to us all” (Wilde, p. 81). Wilde, here, uses the portrait of Dorian to represent the conscience

that Dorian lacks, and Dorian determines to make use of the portrait as a sign that will be, now, his guide through life. The disfigurements that will, from now on, appear on the portrait will represent Dorian's increasingly cruel and self-centered behavior toward others.

Lord Henry, soon afterward, calls upon Dorian (who, having now changed his mind regarding Sibyl, intends, again, to marry her) and Dorian is as yet unaware of the fact that Sibyl—as the direct result of his cruelty—has taken her own life. Lord Henry, knowing that Sibyl Vane is dead, asks Dorian if he had gone to speak with her after her performance the night before, and asks Dorian if he had made “a scene with her.” Dorian replies by telling Lord Henry, “I was brutal, Harry—perfectly brutal. But it is all right now. I am not sorry for anything that has happened. It has taught me to know myself better” (Wilde, p. 82). It is here in the novel that Oscar Wilde reveals the deeper meaning of the significant representational character of Sibyl Vane. The name Sibyl Vane is packed with meaning, and we need, now, to unpack some of this meaning. Sibyl Vane, being something of a catalyst, has enabled Dorian, in his own words, “to know myself better.” And this is why he now wishes (again) to marry her: like the portrait, she is now of some use to him. To Dorian, Sibyl is no longer “a third-rate actress with a pretty face” (Wilde, p. 35) as she was the night before, she has now become, for Dorian, Sibyl Vane the woman who can help him to know himself better. I think Wilde has created both the name and the character of Sibyl Vane in order to represent the mystical prophetic insight that was given by the sibylline oracle of Delphi in ancient Greece. The name Sibyl is taken from the word Greek word: sibyl, meaning: prophetess, and the ancient oracle of Sibyl at Delphi was said to reveal prophetic truths about those who would seek her prophetic insight. The oracle's motto “know thyself” is said to have been inscribed over the entrance way to the temple of Apollo in which she sat to give her prophecies. Thus the Sibyl of our story represents the mystic oracle that enables Dorian, as he puts it, “to know myself better.” I also believe it's safe for us to assume that Wilde's choice of Sibyl's last name, Vane, is a homonym alluding to Dorian's narcissistic vanity. Dorian has no conscience, and seeing that he can now make use of both Sibyl and Basil's portrait as means to his own ends, he treats them both as tools that he can use in order to adapt, socially, to life in the world as a conscienceless being.

We've seen, in this paper, only a few examples of how Oscar Wilde, a great writer, uses language—a system of signs—to create signs and representations, both fictional characters and objects, in order to express much deeper meanings than the simple meanings which these characters and object might at first appear to signify and represent. As we've seen, the signs and representations Wilde has created in *The Picture of Dorian Grey* do not simply represent the characters and objects of the story, they also represent and reveal much deeper meanings. I also believe that Wilde reveals, in this novel, various aspects of himself in the fictional characters of Basil, Dorian, and Lord Henry. Like the character of Basil, Wilde has put much of himself into his work and if we have read his work closely we will see much of the author in it. The writer—who must learn to master the craft of sign making—uses language, which is a complex system of (arbitrary) signs, in order to communicate to us, the readers, much deeper truths about himself and the world around us, which would otherwise remain hidden from us if not revealed by a close, critical reading of the text. In the semiotic and representational sense, we are all complex signs (texts) waiting to be interpreted and understood, as is the world around us. No doubt the interpretations of all complex signs are limitless, because we ourselves are limitlessly complex beings. Like Dorian, we, too, stand in need of an oracle that will enable us to know ourselves better.

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[1] Michael Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press; 1986) pp. 71-72

[2] Ibid., p. 60 (emphasis in original)

[3] See: Ibid., pp. 61-63

[4] Michael Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press; 1981) p. 3

[5] Michael Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press; 1986) p. 67 (emphasis in the original)

[6] Ibid., p. 68

[7] Ibid., p. 62